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ABSTRACT

Each fall at Syracuse University, new teaching assistants participate in an ambitious teaching project. Over the span of four days, new teaching assistants select their own topic of inquiry for the one or two writing courses (or "studios") they will be teaching, imagine a sequence of reading and writing assignments, construct a grading scheme, learn teaching practices (like setting up peer groups or doing research response logs) design a syllabus based on a five-week start, and prepare themselves to walk into class and start "teaching writing" often for the very first time. This "mini-studio" introduces teaching assistants intellectually and experientially to basic studio practices and principles and then asks them to reflect on these practices and principles as they plan their own course. (RS)

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# BIG IDEAS FOR MINI-STUDIOS

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The Writing Program
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March 21, 1991

Each fall at Syracuse we have the big task of bringing brand-new TAs into a very ambitious teaching project. We have one short week to get them ready to select their own topic of inquiry for the one or two writing courses (or "studios") they'll be teaching, to imagine a sequence of writing and reading assignments, to construct a grading scheme, to learn teaching practices (like setting up peer groups or doing reading response logs), to design a syllabus based on a five week start, and to be prepared to walk into class on Monday morning and start "teaching writing" often for the very first time.

Mini-studios, fast-forward versions of the studio curriculum, are our response to this particular TA training situation.

## The Context

Let us explain the context a little. The Writing Program at Syracuse University is engaged in a communal effort to design and teach writing studios across all four years of the undergraduate curriculum, with each studio taking up a different angle on the relationship of student writers to the contexts they are located and learning in -- the university, the disciplines and professions, the larger culture. No longer a simple skills or service enterprise, the Writing Program is exploring ways to support students as they come to understand, study in, and negotiate the intellectual and discursive practices of the academy (and beyond). The "writing studio" has become an interesting and rather interdisciplinary site, where teachers and students investigate composing processes, theories of rhetoric and cultural studies, readings from different disciplines, and contrastive analyses of various academic genre.

All teachers, including new TAs, design their own courses in light of Writing Program general principles and defining characteristics, as set forth in the "General Principles of the Studios and the Spiral Curriculum." Rather than an overly prescriptive or reductive set of rules, this document calls for an ongoing dialogue about curriculum design and development among all the teachers in the Writing Program. It offers a set of hypotheses about what learning to write means across the entire undergraduate curriculum. Teachers in the program are invited to read this "spiral curriculum;" trace its arguments

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about development, learning and teaching; and think about what it might mean in terms of actually designing courses and writing syllabi. Experiences and insights emerging from classroom teaching are important to this ongoing dialogic process of curriculum design and development.

This enterprise depends upon a particular kind of dynamic and interactive teaching community. As Louise Phelps (Director of the Writing Program) explains in "Practical Wisdom and the Geography of Knowledge," "teaching depends for its richness on a community of shared practice constituted through exchanges of talk and writing about curriculum. At SU, we are working actively to create such a sense of community among a mixed group (numbering close to 150) including full-time research faculty, part-time professional writing teachers, and graduate student teaching assistants" (p. 8). Through talk, writing, inquiry, and action, teachers in the Writing Program are working to create a developmentally-related series of writing studios and practical knowledge about the teaching of writing more generally.

We believe that good teaching results from (and may require) this interaction of communal talk and individual course design -- and that this is as true for new TAs as it is for experienced teachers.

So each year a group of new teaching assistants, primarily from the English Department, enters this communal curriculum process. Their origin alone complicates the task of preparing them to design and teach their own studios because the Writing Program is now separate from (and not always at ease with) the English Department. In addition, most TAs come to study theory or literature or creative writing, and rather abruptly find themselves having to take up the teaching of writing in serious ways. Not handed a standardized syllabus or given a recommended textbook, TAs have to become "teachers of writing" rather quickly, with little or no previous training and with mixed (at best) motivation. We have only one week to prepare them for all this -- so we have to do a lot, and we have to do it quickly.

**The Problems of Orientation**

In terms of new teachers, then, it is clear that the very first invitation the Writing Program extends to them -- the invitation to design writing studio courses -- assumes some knowledge of literacy development and writing instruction. An orientation must either make up for knowledge that's not present or has to introduce some process or method of discovery and exploration that will allow new teachers to develop some of this knowledge over time and through practice. In other words, it has to offer a site for inquiry -- ideally, a

site for communal inquiry for doing, reading, and theorizing together about what it means to "teach writing."

An orientation also has to actively support TAs through this process by making explicit the creativity and the chaos that it entails -- and by recognizing the pressures it places on teachers, especially brand new ones. There are lots of stresses and strains on new TAs just to begin with, as they enter MA and PhD programs, and we are quite aware that "inviting" them not only to teach writing, typically for the first time, but also to design their own course adds to that stress and may become overwhelming.

In addition to understanding the "why"--"why design courses like the writing studios we teach at SU?" our orientation plan has to offer some "whats" as well. New teachers have lots of questions, like "What do I do on the first day?" "What should they write on the first day?" "What do I call myself?" "What do I call them?" So we need to make room in the orientation for TAs to hear from more experienced teachers about practical decisions and assignments and strategies they have used to set up peer groups or organize a grading scheme or lead small group discussions or select a topic of inquiry for their course. They have to learn about the design of studio curriculum, text selection, syllabi construction, and assignment staging and sequencing for their individual courses. And ideally, we need to find a way to teach these skills that will capitalize on literacies they already have, while still offering them possibilities and directions they have not yet encountered.

And finally, our orientation needs to introduce TAs not only to the Writing Program curriculum but to the Writing Program community as well. We want to present a picture that is inviting but not self-congratulatory, something that communicates the pedagogical advantages of a dynamic and exciting communal place while acknowledging the fact that we often appear overwhelming and daunting to newcomers. We also want to "announce" the mentoring and support practices of the Writing Program community: the fall teaching practicum, English 613; the weekly teaching groups; and professional development activities available to them throughout the semester.

Capturing the essence of studio teaching proved elusive for us during the first year of the Writing Program. Over and over the question put to us by new teachers was, "So what exactly is a studio?" And over and over we found ourselves giving a truthful but unsatisfactory (to us and certainly to them) answer: "It's not a simple thing that we can just tell you -- you have to learn it by doing it." We knew that it was only in the doing that new teachers could begin to develop some individual enactment of the studio curriculum. Just as our colleagues who have developed the summer National Writing Project institutes knew, we also knew that this doing illustrated an essential understanding of the relationship

of theory and practice. Rather than try to pin down "the" studio definition, we needed a way to enact (or perform) the interplay of knowing and doing and then "freeze the frame" and invite teachers to look at and reflect on what we had done together.

We have invented two things for new TAs: an "exploding" syllabus that covers the first five weeks of the semester and a week -long orientation that includes a four day "mini-studio" that a group of teachers in our program plan over a summer.

**The Mini-Studio**

The mini-studio is a fast-forward version of a possible unit in a writing studio that introduces TAs intellectually and experientially to basic studio practices and principles and that then asks them to reflect on these practices and principles as they plan the design of their own studio course. In the mini-studio new TAs read articles about critical literacy, participate in various kinds of group discussions, free-write and do reading responses to the more difficult articles, and work in collaborative learning groups on the drafts of a paper they have to write over the course of four days. Last year, for example, new TAs had to write a five page description of that they might do in a studio -- and why. At the end the teachers put together a class magazine from these descriptions for a final discussion of studio teaching.

We divide the TAs into four small groups and invite full-time faculty to pair with veteran TAs or professional writing instructors to co-teach them. Though we provide a common topic of inquiry, set of readings, and general four-day structure, each teaching team modifies or designs their mini-studio to suit their teaching styles and the particular possibilities they recognize in our plan. We do ask that all four mini-studios address the same topics and the same texts on the same days. That way the small "mentor groups" that make up the afternoon sessions can have some common issues to discuss. Differences in practices that are sure to occur in the mini-studios are quite desirable because they generate discussions in the mentor groups that help new instructors envision sites of improvisation and flexibility as they work to implement Writing Program goals in their studio teaching.

The mini-studios meet for three hours each morning from Monday through Thursday. In the afternoons TAs have homework such as informal responses to texts, reading assignments, and drafts for a reflective essay. By Thursday we have also introduced the five-week "exploding" syllabus, so that teachers can begin to envision quite specifically the overall shape of their own studio.

Each year an important decision involves the selection of the common topic of inquiry . This topic matters because it allows us to model how an instructor teaches critical reading and writing through processes of co-investigation with her students. A topic of

inquiry is not simply a theme or a "thing" to talk about: it is an intellectual set of problems that students take up, explore, and debate as a context in which to improve their skills. Last year the topic of inquiry was "critical literacy." We focused the mini-studio around four questions: What is critical literacy and how might it relate to personal experience? How do we help students read complex texts? What is the role of collaborative learning in this process? And is the essay a central genre in facilitating the development of a critical literacy?

TAs read their own informal writing, "the spiral curriculum," a description of the studios written for students, and Kurt Spellmeyer's "A Common Ground: The Essay in the Academy."

Then we put the topic of inquiry and the readings into play through engaging TAs in studio practices that they might use in their own studio classes: freewriting, structured class discussions (e.g., webbing), collaborative work, informal reading responses, drafting, peer groups, and final drafting.

This is, obviously, a busy week, and it does become stressful, as TAs have to work within this bifurcated perspective of learner and about-to-be-teacher, without the sure grounding of a standardized syllabus or a required textbook. So we have lots of second year TAs and professional writing instructors (PWIs) around to help ease that tension and to point out the value designing courses will ultimately have on their own educational and professional training. Nevertheless there is a level of anxiety that we have learned to expect and to respond to as fully as we can. We know that after about three or four weeks in the classroom teachers begin to find their way as teachers in creative and productive ways.

**What Works for Us -- and Why**

TAs learn a lot through the mini-studio class. They learn first-hand what it means to be both a teacher and a student in a studio environment. They begin to participate in the larger discussion in the Writing Program about the emerging studio curriculum. As teaching gets defined as a public activity, they understand the support they will have from mentors and writing consultants who can come into their classes (to so things like help set up peer groups or explain how ethnographies work). And most importantly, during this week collegial relationships form among the TAs, professional writing instructors, and full-time faculty through what is at Syracuse the shared enterprise of teaching writing.

We try to demonstrate to the new TAs that teaching writing is a serious endeavor -- intellectually and ethically valuable -- and the central epistemological activity of the Writing Program.

We also learn from the new TAs, as they raise questions, explore possible topics of inquiry for their studios, and re-invent yet again our own sense of what a studio might be.

So we are pretty happy with this form of TA education, but it's surely not perfect nor is it suitable for all writing programs.

TAs complain about the pace and the workload -- they do a lot in four days. We are still trying to find the right relationship of how much material to give new TAs ahead of time to read. When we have offered too much, it has been confusing. When we have offered too little, it has been mystifying. We just can't predict in individual ways the initial points of entry into this complex landscape. There is lots of knowledge that's just "in the air" -- and newcomers often resent the sense of jargon, code, given, and assumption they run into. It's tough to "explain" everything at once, when ideas change so frequently and when there is little sense of a shared history.

What we can do is listen carefully each year to the voices of the new TAs who have gone through the mini-studios in order to try to fine-tune our planning for the next year.

It is also difficult to fast-forward new TAs into what has become a rather sophisticated series of courses: they may see through all the activity what the possibilities of the program might look like, but it is only when they slow down those activities into real-time in their classes that the full meaning of those possibilities unfolds.

There are other risks involved in trying to communicate the excitement we feel about this teaching community and this curriculum. New TAs can be put off by the sense of "newness" and not successfully relate their own educational experiences and knowledge to the kinds of practices and principles we are talking about. We risk minimizing what new TAs do know about language and language teaching in an effort to create new pedagogical space. We may play too fast and loose with all the advantages of being in an ever-changing curriculum, and we are looking at our own ways of talking to counter this possibility.

We also run an institutional risk, because we openly encourage new teachers to take risks in their very new teaching. While we offset this with an extensive, ongoing mentor and support network, new TAs may not take advantage of that network, they may compromise their authority in the classroom by not fully understanding or implementing what something like co-inquiry might mean, and they may struggle with students who are taking courses that are more rigidly structured and who then put pressure on the TAs to make their studio courses "more traditional." So we have to talk to new TAs about how to navigate through this -- and we have program structures in place to enable this talk. For example, we have full-time administrators whose primary responsibilities include professional development and the handling of student-teacher relationships.

One might ask, too, why make this so hard for new TAs? Why not give them a syllabus for the whole first semester? After all, they came to Syracuse to pursue their graduate studies, not to take up teaching writing as a full-time career goal. It's a good question. We do insist that TAs take teaching seriously because we believe that good teaching requires a deep engagement in fundamental questions about learning and language and develops within a dynamic teaching community. But we worry about the time and intellectual demands this places on TAs, especially when they get really interested in it. We are now talking informally with the English Department and with the graduate students about this question, from the position put forward by the TAs themselves that this kind of extensive experience with teaching is seen as an important part of their professional training at both the Masters and the PhD level.

**Conclusion: Generative Tensions**

We'd like to conclude by naming the things to come out of this mini-studio enterprise as "generative tensions." What we have ended up with are not solutions or even answers, but possibilities and prospects that seek to negotiate individual, organizational, and institutional constraints.

The most apparent tension is the fact that designing the mini-studios and doing the kind of teacher education we are talking about requires a tremendous amount of work and energy. Supporting this work takes money and resources and institutional commitment. Fortunately, up to this point, at Syracuse, we have a summer curriculum team made up of seven teachers, a full-time administrator, and a faculty consultant who take primary responsibility for imagining, designing, and organizing the fall teaching conference and the mini-studios. Teacher preparation here is taken up by teachers themselves who have both the responsibility and the authority to make and enact plans. As a result, this project becomes a site for us to re-name and re-think our own community, its practices and theory, as we anticipate the arrival of new teachers in the fall.

We have also learned that teacher education must be developed contextually. This means doing a careful analysis of our particular situation in order to design useful orientation or TA educational programs. That very analysis, however, reveals other kinds of tensions for us to consider. We must work in view of both the local teaching community and the emerging issues in the discipline of composition and rhetoric. That's one reason, for example, why we try to take up the "hot questions" of the discipline as topics of inquiry in the mini-studios. Our TA education seeks to locate a process of inquiry within the theoretical framework or debates or tensions that characterize the discipline and therefore that inform teaching.

We must work in view of our relationship to the English Department at Syracuse and its effect on how we introduce new TAs to the studio curriculum. That relationship must be taken into account while, at the same time, we work to enact the themes and values of our particular teaching community. Our best attempt to negotiate this tension, again, is our choice each fall for the mini-studios' topic of inquiry. In picking these topics we try to respect topics that are meaningful to TAs, topics they are interested in pursuing and need to pursue in their professional lives. This desire needs to be balanced by our knowledge about what TAs can actually do with a particular topic of inquiry. What kinds of topics lend themselves to the range of experience represented by a group of 20-25 TAs?

And finally, we must work to enact the reflective practice that's at the very heart of the studio curriculum, and in doing so we create perhaps the most generative tension. In asking TAs to not only write and teach but to watch themselves writing and teaching, we are asking them to do what they will be asking their own students to do. We are asking them to not simply live temporarily in this space of possibility and risk for four days, but to take up this site and locate their teaching in it for the duration of their professional lives in the Writing Program.

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